

THE PROTESTANT CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH: AN ECUMENICAL CONSENSUS

The topic assigned to this paper by the board of the Catholic Theological Society was "The Protestant Concept of the Church," a subject that is no more precise or manageable than "*the* Republican doctrine of free enterprise" or "*the* Democratic doctrine of civil rights" or (*pace* Fr. Van Ackeren and Fr. Healy) "*the* Roman Catholic concept of the relation between Scripture and Tradition." Nevertheless, the ecclesiology of 20th century Protestantism is not as chaotic as some Roman Catholic interpreters suppose (or hope?), and in this paper I shall summarize the understanding of the doctrine of the Church that has emerged from a half-century of ecumenical discussion. My thesis will be that this discussion has shaped the Protestant concept of the Church in a way that modifies older Reformation antitheses. It would perhaps be flattering here to say that this modification came as a result of fraternal admonition from Roman Catholic theology or as a response to *Mystici Corporis*; but except for indirect connections—e.g., between Möhler and German Lutheranism or within the Oxford Movement—it was not the encounter with Roman Catholicism, but a new confrontation of the Protestant traditions with one another, a repossession of the Bible, and a new picture of the Reformation that produced an authentic ecclesiological consensus amid the continuing diversity of Protestant theology.

Nowhere has that consensus been formulated more cogently than in a one-sentence declaration originally framed at St. Andrew's, Scotland, in the summer of 1961 and adopted at the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in December of that year:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and His gift to His Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic Faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one Bread, joining in common

prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all, and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls His people.

Behind each of these phrases is a generation of conflict and research in the commissions and assemblies of Faith and Order and of the World Council. From each of the two principal members of this declaration I shall lift out one affirmation that moves beyond the cul-de-sac of Reformation controversy and represents a sign of real hope for Christian understanding. I shall conclude with a word of caution and a note of irony.

"The unity which is both God's will and His gift to His Church is being made visible"—this is now the affirmation and the hope of the churches that make up the World Council. Of course, unity has always been an attribute of the Church in Christian theology; the Ephesian letter and the Nicene Creed were too explicit to evade. But in conflict with a Post-Tridentine theology that could not always distinguish between the Church as organism and the Church as organization, or, for that matter, between the Church and the Kingdom of God, the Protestant Reformers made extensive use of the Augustinian distinction between the Church as visible (*corpus permixtum*) and the Church as invisible (*corpus fidelium*). But whereas St. Augustine invoked this distinction against the Donatists in order to summon them back to Catholic unity in a Church whose spotted actuality seemed to belie the affirmation of *una sancta Ecclesia*, the Reformers found in the distinction a device for affirming the essential unity of the Church amid its existential divisions, or her unity *coram Deo* despite her schisms *coram mundo*, or her unity *in spe* above and beyond her disunity *in re*. Luther, to be sure, spoke of the Church not as invisible but as hidden, saying in response to Erasmus that "*abscondita est Ecclesia et latent sancti*"; but both Melancthon and Calvin made the invisibility of the Church a prime attribute, Melancthon because of the problem of disunity and Calvin through his correlation of the doctrine of the Church with the doctrine of election.

In the history of Protestant theology after the Reformation, many factors conspired to elevate this idea of the invisibility of the Church, specifically the invisibility of her unity, to the status of an axiom. I am impressed but not persuaded by the thesis of Joseph Lortz that late medieval nominalism was one such factor, but it does seem clear that two other movements prominent in Protestant theological history bore a large part of the responsibility: Pietism and Kantian idealism. Beginning as a protest against the externalism and formalism of Protestant Orthodoxy, the Pietist movement emphasized the inwardness of faith and the individuality of the relation between God and man in a manner that made the Church more an effect than a cause of the individual's conversion. The Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal—not unrelated, perhaps, to Pietism—facilitated a theological method that made the unity of the Church a *Ding an sich* inaccessible to sense-experience and available only to faith, while the disunity of the empirical Church was the aspect it presented in the world of phenomena. As the original divisions of the Reformation proliferated, the concept of the invisible unity of the Church seemed the only way for a fissiparous Protestantism to make some sort of theological sense out of ecclesiological doctrine and denominational fact.

But now such a rationalization has become impossible. Driven to mutual service by the upheavals of the 20th century, the churches of the World Council have found that the reasons for visible unity are ultimately not pragmatic but theological. The sacerdotal prayer of Our Lord *ut omnes unum sint* is answered not in a Platonic realm beyond the empirical, but in history, where the world may know that He has been sent by the Father. The declaration of St. Andrew's therefore follows the New Testament in linking Holy Baptism and the confession of faith as expressions of this visible unity, and it paraphrases the Book of Acts in listing the forms taken by the one committed fellowship of the Church: one apostolic Faith, one Gospel, the breaking of the one Bread, common prayer, and a corporate life of *martyria* and *diakonia*. All of these are visible (or audible) functions of the life of the Church. Each demands more specification and definition than this brief formula provides; and

we are not equally agreed—neither with one another nor with Roman Catholicism—about the content of each. Thus there is still a long way to go, but the ecumenical consensus reached thus far is an estimable thing nonetheless. As Roman Catholic ecclesiology begins to extricate itself from the rigidity of the Counter-Reformation, it should find many points of meaningful contact in this consensus. Let me mention merely two, without further elaboration in this paper: the ecclesiological and ecumenical implications of a radically Augustinian doctrine of Holy Baptism; and the definition of the real presence of Christ in His Church as a basis for restating the doctrine of the real presence in the Blessed Sacrament (rather than *vice versa*).

The second part of the declaration also contains a significant affirmation to which Roman Catholic ecclesiology can speak: "who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages." Here the unity of the Church is represented as a unity in time as well as in space. The continuity of the Church's tradition thus becomes part of the definition of her unity. For a historian of the Church and of theology, this formulation of the doctrine of the Church is a gratifying recognition that in the definition of Christian teaching, the history of Christian doctrine plays a role that goes beyond diagnosis, confirmation, and the other ancillary tasks assigned to tradition in much of Protestant thought. But for our purposes here, this admission of tradition into the doctrine of the unity of the Church can make possible a study of the tradition in a context more conducive to mutual understanding than were the 16th and 17th centuries. It is interesting that during the debates over the declaration of St. Andrew's this very phrase "and all ages" drew the fire of some theologians, who argued that the history of the Church, being in the past and therefore unchangeable, cannot participate meaningfully in the dynamic process of establishing and articulating that unity which is both God's will and His gift to His Church.

The answer to this objection involves several arguments and strikes at the center of the entire issue. For one thing, the phrase "the history of the Church" can mean either the events of Christian

history or the records of those events; and while history is indeed unchangeable as event, it is subject to reconsideration as the record of the event. The most important modern instance of such reconsideration, at least as far as this issue is concerned, is the discovery that the tradition of the Church is exegetical. The Fathers of the Church spoke as they did because they regarded themselves as interpreters of the Sacred Scriptures. Therefore they are not to be made a substitute for the Scriptures; nor, on the other hand, can the Scriptures be properly understood apart from the Church. A second answer to the attack upon tradition is the discovery that the only alternative to tradition is bad tradition. To defy the accumulated traditions of the medieval Church in the name of the freedom of God and of the renewing Spirit, the Reformers could be more cavalier in their attitude toward tradition than subsequent developments permit us to be.

Thus, as I have pointed out in my chapter in *The Old and the New in the Church*, a study recently published by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, "tradition is primitive, tradition is inevitable, tradition is exegetical." Applied to the declaration of St. Andrew's as it affects the problem of Roman Catholic-Protestant relations, this view of tradition suggests that it is time for both sides to get beyond the frozen positions and the clichés of the 16th century. If tradition is primitive, Protestant theology must admit that *sola Scriptura* requires redefinition. But if tradition is exegetical, Roman Catholic theology must admit that *sola Scriptura*, properly understood, is correct. The primitive Church based its proclamation upon strings of passages from the Old Testament, which it interpreted in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Thus one must say: The Church wrote the Bible, but the Church was born with a Bible in its hand. Similarly, the writings of the Fathers are expository, even the polemical writings that have been handed down to us.

Let me express my point by reference to two recent Roman Catholic books. Without trying to prejudge the outcome of the panel on Scripture, would I be fair in asking whether party-line Roman Catholic theology has really come to terms with the implications of

Pere Danielou's *Sacramentum futuri*? My impression is that it has not, and that therefore it still interprets the notion of tradition as though tradition were not the explication of Sacred Scripture, but a second source of revelation; and this is how it interprets the fourth session of the Council of Trent. On the other hand, has party-line Protestant theology dared to face the implications of Fr. Brown's *Sensus Plenior*? I am sure that it has not; for if it ever did, it could no longer pretend that a positivistic or a fundamentalist recovery of the *sensus simplex et germanus* can really come up with all that a particular passage of Scripture has to say in the Church.

Until we face the implications of these two theses, our mutual discussions will not get very far. But now that Protestant ecclesiology has acknowledged the necessity of finding unity with the Church of all ages, perhaps the elusive *consensus quinquesaecularis* proposed by George Calixtus in the 17th century can begin to add its influence to the growing pursuit of the Church's unity. It is ironic that between Calixtus and the present we have in fact grown together on issues like the authority of Scripture and even on the doctrine of justification, as well as on the *De Ecclesia*. But in the interim we have grown apart at the very points where, in spite of everything, the Reformers were at one with the Catholic tradition. Luther defended the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin with vigor, and he continued to preach on the Feast of the Assumption! This irony gives real poignancy to the phrase, "holding the one apostolic Faith" in the declaration. Yet even here there has been a real change during the past decades, for which one must thank especially Karl Barth. Trinitarian orthodoxy, albeit with a Sabellian flavor, once more has a prominent voice in Protestant theology. We who believe in and pray for the unity of Christ's people must draw upon every resource we can find to help speed the day. No resource is more fruitful than the message of the tradition, properly understood, and the historical scholarship of the last century has made this more available than ever before.

Thus the Protestant concept of the Church has turned to tradition with a new openness and readiness to hear. Roman Catholic thought has turned to tradition with a new recognition of its biblical

and evangelical power. The unity of the Church is made visible in the unity of the development of its doctrine, which is unity not uniformity. Could such a unity-in-diversity ever be achieved again? Not in our time, perhaps not ever. But it could if the hearts once created and recreated by the Holy Spirit were to open themselves again to His transforming grace and to trust His leading, as just two weeks ago we all prayed and sang, separately and yet together:

Veni, Creator Spiritus,
Mentes Tuorum visita.
Imple superna gratia,
Quae Tu creasti, pectora.

Amen: So be it.

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